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ART. VIII.—*Some Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Religious Opinions of the Lurka Coles.* By the late Dr. WILLIAM DUNBAR, I.I.E.I.C.S.

[*Read 19th January, 1861.]*

THE Coles inhabit a great extent of country. In former times they possessed the whole of Chota-Nagpore, which may now be said to be divided between them and the Dhangars or Onraons, who came from Rotasghur. The chief men in most of the villages are still however of the old Moonda or Cole tribe, and they do not intermarry with the Dhangars. The greater part of Singhboom is inhabited by Coles, and we find them numerous in Bamanghatty, and dispersed to the vicinities of Cuttack and Midnapore. The Lurka Coles, as they are termed, inhabit those extensive tracts as yet but little known, which go under the name of the Colekans. Part of these wilds is situated in the Singhboom district, and the inhabitants pay a nominal obedience to the Maharajah of that province, but the greater proportion of this population is more under the influence of the Rajah of Mokurburj than of any of the other powerful chiefs in that part of the country. But even his orders are obeyed only where they are supposed to tend to the advantage of the Coles themselves. Upon the whole it may be said of this singular people that, living in a primeval and patriarchal manner under their Moondas and Mankies, they have managed to preserve a sort of savage independence, making themselves dreaded and feared by their more powerful and civilized neighbours. They have always been ready to fly to arms at the call of any enterprising and desperate adventurer. It is well known that the famous rebel Gunganaram, when his own forces were broken and destroyed by the troops of Government, found refuge among the Lurka Coles, and prevailed upon them to espouse his quarrel. Had he not been cut off in his first action with the Thakoor of Kirsawa, there is no saying how long he might have defied our arms in the wilds and jungles of Colekan. The Colekan is divided into different peers, as they are

termed, or pergunnahs. These peers are, generally speaking, not of any great extent, two or three moderate marches carry you through each of them. There can be little doubt, and such I believe is the tradition among the people themselves, that the Lurka Coles came originally from Chota-Nagpore, and are descendants of the old Moondas or Moondarees of that district. Finding the romantic hills and vallies of Chota-Nagpore too confined for their increasing numbers, and stimulated, perhaps, by the desire of plunder, or by that wandering propensity characteristic of many savage nations, they emigrated long ago, and now form a distinct and powerful tribe, living in a barbarous condition in a country still more rude and mountainous than that which their forefathers abandoned. The same cast of countenance prevails in the two races, though, perhaps, tinged with a wilder and more fierce expression in the Lurkas. The Ouraons, who inhabit great part of Chota-Nagpore, regard these Coles as a tribe inferior to themselves, and do not intermarry with them. The villages in the Colekan are ruled by Moondas and Mankies, as in Chota-Nagpore. The former, the Moonda, is the proprietor of one village; while the latter holds six, eight, or twelve. These village potentates used frequently to wage fierce war with one another, and bitter and long existing feuds have often prevailed amongst them. There is this peculiarity in the Cole character, however, that serious and bloody as may be the domestic quarrels, no sooner are they threatened with hostilities from without, than all their animosities are laid aside and forgotten for a time, and they join unanimously to repel the expected danger. It appears to have been their constant aim to keep themselves as distinct from other tribes as possible, and, with the exception of a few low caste Hindoos, such as those inhabiting Jugernathpore, these districts are possessed by Coles alone. The population appears to be rather numerous, though some parts of the district are by no means so densely inhabited as others. Where we fall in with a large river or a full running stream, there the villages are thickly clustered together. In many places water is exceedingly scarce. The Coles have not yet learned the simple art of digging tanks, or rather perhaps they are too indolent and lazy to set about doing so. The very few diminutive tanks seen were in the vicinity of villages partly inhabited by Hindoos, and these contained a miserable supply of foul and ill-tasted water.

The villages are generally built on some elevated spot surrounded by trees, and, at some little distance from the principal entrance to the villages, the Cole standard or ensign, a pair of buffalo horns, is suspended in a conspicuous situation. The mode of building is some-

what different from that commonly practised in Chota-Nagpore, where the huts are built of mud. Here the people build after the fashion called "wattle and dab," using at the same time a number of strong timbers in the erection of each individual hut. In this way the new lines at Chaibassa are built, and they appear to be strong, and likely to stand for many years. The method in which the Coles lay on the chopper of a hut is also ingenious and neat. I may add that these men are by no means inexpert carpenters, after their own fashion, using the small adze, almost the only instrument they employ with no little skill and dexterity.

Cultivation and agriculture appear to be at the lowest ebb in the Colekan. Scarcely anything but *dhan* is raised, and the fields in which it is sown are so small, ill-formed, and to all appearance so badly attended to, that abundant crops are, I suspect, of rare occurrence. Immense tracts of fine land have been for ages covered with the old forest trees or with dense and shrubby jungle, and no attempts seem to have been made at any time to clear the soil, the Coles contenting themselves with the few open patches which are found near their villages. I was particularly struck, when marching through some of the peers, with seeing extensive pieces of ground consisting of that rich black soil which is said to be so favourable for the cultivation of cotton (*kootn*). In these places the jungle was always more than usually luxuriant. Some few of the inhabitants cultivate an inferior kind of cotton plant, and a few weavers prepare the scanty clothing worn by either sex. In some Cole villages a little sugar-cane is grown, and some tobacco (*jookool*), an article highly prized, in the shape of raw green cheroots. In years of want and famine it was the custom with this wild and savage people, when their own scanty resources and supplies were exhausted, to proceed in armed bands and carry off plunder from the territories of their neighbours, not unfrequently committing many atrocities in their progress.

In regard to *dress*, that of both sexes is alike, a strip of cloth brought round the loins and passed between the thighs forming their only covering. The women wear a profusion of coloured beads suspended from their necks, and have their ears pierced with a number of small brass rings. Their diet is of a very promiscuous nature; everything almost that can be considered eatable being relished by them, and much of what we consider carrion being eagerly sought for and devoured. In this respect they do not differ from the Coles of Chota-Nagpore. They are greatly addicted to drunkenness; all, from the Mankie to the poorest villager, drink their intoxicating liquids on every occasion, and it is no uncommon thing to see a whole

village in a state of brutal intoxication. It has frequently been remarked with wonder what an enormous quantity of ardent spirits a Cole can drink without apparently being in the least affected. The Coles have not the slightest idea of the use of money, all their simple transactions being carried on upon the principle of barter. Thus, if a man should wish to purchase a cow, he offers so many goats or so much rice in exchange. In preparing a temporary hut at Chailbassa, in Goomla Peer, I was compelled, on the refusal of the labourers to accept pice or rupees, to pay them in rice, an article which at that time could not be very well afforded. These men showed no small degree of acuteness in making their bargains, and always took care to see that their daily allowance was fairly supplied to them. Almost the only sort of property which the Coles can be said to possess consists in their large herds of cattle and buffaloes, which are sent to graze in the jungles. The breed of horned cattle is the same as that met with in Chota-Nagpore. The malady, called by them "rògh," which proves so fatal in the latter province, extends its ravages among the cattle here also ; and I am informed that a few years back great numbers were swept away by the pestilential scourge. Pigs, goats, and a few sheep constitute the remainder of the domestic animals usually found in the villages. Of wild animals, we find the tiger, leopard, hyena, and wild buffalo, infecting the jungles. Bears are met with in many of the hilly places, and the mountain ranges are traversed by that noble animal the gour. The deeper rivers are haunted by alligators of considerable size.

The religion of the Lurka Coles is nothing but a superstition of the grossest kind. Their great divinity is the sun (*suruj*), next to the sun ranks the moon (*chandoo*), and then the stars, which they believe to be the children of the latter. They uniformly upon solemn and great occasions invoke the sun, and by him many of these lawless men have, at times, sworn allegiance to the Honourable Company. Another form of oath used by them is that of swearing upon a small quantity of rice, a tiger's skin and claws, and the earth of the white ants' nests ; implying, that should they violate the engagement they are about to enter upon, they deserve to have their crops and fruits destroyed, and to be themselves delivered up to the most ferocious of the jungle monsters. Besides the sun and moon, other inferior divinities are supposed to exist, to whom the Coles offer up sacrifices of various kinds. These spirits are supposed to inhabit the trees and topes in and around the village. We could never ascertain distinctly what degree of power was attributed to these Penates, as we may call them ; but the belief the Coles entertain of the power and influence

of the Bhongas must be considerable, as they will on no account allow those trees to be denuded of their branches, and still less cut down. My own coolies, natives of Chota-Nagpore, were driven from a tope where they had begun to fell wood for my own use, by a party of exasperated villagers, who alleged that the Bhongas, expelled from their habitation, would infallibly wreak their vengeance upon the villagers themselves. The Lurka Coles believe strongly in witchcraft ; and this belief, so common among all savage nations, often leads them to the commission of the most dreadful crimes. The customs of the Coles regarding the inheritance of property is singular, and was first explained to me in the case of a Mankie, as he is termed, whose villages are contiguous to the cantonments of Chaibassa. Although he ruled over a considerable number of these, and was reckoned a powerful man among his class, I was surprised to find that his house was a small and poor one, and that his younger brother resided in the largest building in the place, which had formerly belonged to the deceased Mankie, his father. On enquiry, I found that on the death of the parent, the youngest son uniformly receives the largest share of the property strictly personal ; and hence the Mankie, though he succeeded to his father's authority and station as a patriarchal ruler, was obliged to resign all the goods and chattels to his younger brother. The Coles now show no unwillingness in times of sickness to put themselves in the hands of European medical men, and they take freely whatever medicines may be administered to them. The confidence indeed which this poor and barbarous race repose in British faith and skill, is only equalled by their dread of our power and greatness. In time of sickness they have recourse to prayers and sacrifices, and they place more confidence in the latter than in any of the few and simple drugs with which they are acquainted. In proportion to the severity of the disease, or the aggravation of the symptoms, are the extent and costliness of the sacrifices. Thus, in case of trifling ailments, fowls are sacrificed ; in cases of pestilence or severe fevers, bullocks and buffaloes.

It is the universal custom in the various villages, that when a woman is seized with the pains of labour, she is immediately removed to a lonely hut, the door is shut upon her, offerings of various kinds are suspended near it to propitiate the Bhongas, and no one ventures near till all is over. The female sex, it may be observed, is not kept secluded and shut up, as is the case with the Hindoos and Mussulmans ; they mingle freely with the men, and even join them in council. The Coles are said to behave in a very kind and affectionate manner to their wives and female children.

Not amongst the least singular of the customs of the Coles is that connected with their marriage. When a youth has fixed his affections on a female, generally the inhabitant of some neighbouring village, she is waylaid and carried off to his house by himself and his friends. So soon as information of this reaches the parents of the girl, they proceed to the village of the ravisher, not, however, in general, with any hostile purpose. Interviews take place between the friends on either side, and at length matters are brought to a final settlement ; the new husband paying to the father of his spouse a certain number of cows, goats, or buffaloes, according to his means, or the beauty and comeliness of his bride. After this a scene of feasting and intoxication generally follows, in which women and children as well as men participate.

The Coles burn their dead, carefully collecting the bones and ashes, and burying them with offerings of rice in or near their villages, placing perpendicular or horizontal slabs of stone over each particular grave. These grave-stones form a remarkable object, and strike the eye of every stranger on approaching a Cole village. The only weapons used by the Coles, whether in war or hunting, are the bow and arrow, and the tulwa, or axe. From their earliest years boys are taught the use of the former ; and of the strength and skill with which they shoot I have heard many remarkable instances.

The language of the Coles of this part of the country differs a good deal from that spoken by the men of Chota-Nagpore. It is needless to remark, that it is totally distinct from any other tongue spoken by the different tribes of India. It is not a written language ; not a single letter of it is known. In fact, even the traditions of this singular and aboriginal race are most vague and uncertain. They have lived from time immemorial almost totally secluded from all intercourse with their civilized neighbours, allowing no stranger to occupy their soil, and only known to the tribes in their vicinity by their repeated and daring inroads, and their savage and ferocious character. The most powerful of the various chiefs, whose territories they have at different times plundered, have never had courage to pursue the Coles to their fastnesses, but have uniformly acted on the defensive ; and though in the last expedition against them no active opposition was met with, it is well known that, in former years, they have shown considerable resistance to the troops of Government. It is to be hoped that a better state of things has now been established, that the Coles will gradually be weaned from their savage and predatory pursuits, and that the blessings of civilization will make sure progress among them.

The country around Kirsawa and Seraikela, belonging to the Thakoor of these places, is, on the whole, well cultivated, and tolerably productive. Advancing from Kirsawa, you cross the Sunjai river, always a beautiful stream, and here is the boundary of the Thakoor's territory. Beyond is the Colekan. The change in the appearance of the land is now very striking : scanty patches of cultivation here and there meet the eye—all else is a barren rocky waste, or a bushy jungle. The people have a wild peculiar appearance, which it is not very easy to describe. Their scanty clothing, strange manners, and more strange language, soon convince you that you are among a race of savages.

Much the same sort of country prevails until you reach Chaibassu, in Goomla Peer, where a cantonment has recently been established. Three or four marches take you to Burrunda Peer, to the south, the most restless and disturbed part of the Colekan, and, it may be added, perhaps the most inaccessible. The jungle here is very dense, and consists of both tree and bush jungle. Some parts of the Peer are hilly, but the soil, generally speaking, though sometimes stony, is rich and good ; it is a deep jet black. The vegetable debris appears to have mixed well with the original mould ; and the wild luxuriance of the jungle sufficiently proves, that were it once cleared away, the soil could soon, and with little trouble, be adapted for many agricultural purposes. Judging of the Colekan from those parts of it traversed by the troops on the march, we should call it a hilly country. Several extensive hilly ranges were met with, many not laid down in the maps, and those which had a place in them inaccurately described. These chains ran in various directions, were of different forms, though most of them assumed what by geologists is called the "round-backed formation," and appeared to be composed of a variety of rocks. One remarkable chain is the Singh-ásan, about 800 feet high, bold, steep, and nearly precipitous on one side, gently sloping and covered with jungle on the other. A rough examination of the Ghaut, where we crossed this range, showed it to be composed mostly of a coarse conglomerate, containing much quartz ; a second and smaller chain of hills behind the Singh-ásan, and near the village of Pungwa, consisted chiefly of rock slate. The Burkola hills, distant six miles from Chaibassu, stretching at first pretty nearly north and south, and then, under the denomination of the Ragree hills, trending away to southwest, are already famous for the dreadful storms which come sweeping over their summits. They are about 700 feet above the plain, and are cleft in many places into picturesque hollows and ravines. One detached portion of this chain which I visited was mostly composed

of masses of hard greenstone, having a conchoidal fracture, and frequently giving a metallic ring when struck by the hammer.

Besides these, and other mountain chains, there are, as in Chota-Nagpore, numerous smaller isolated hills, scattered as it were over the face of the country. Quartz abounds everywhere, sometimes lamellar, sometimes crystallized, sometimes having numerous hollows and veins filled with ochrous earth, iron ore, and occasionally copper pyrites. Lime is found near Chaibassa and elsewhere. Iron in the kankar shape, and in a much purer form, abounds ; indeed, a great proportion of the rocks in many tracts in the Colekan seem to be highly ferruginous. It is reported, and I believe correctly, that some of the precious metals, and more rare minerals, are to be found in some parts of the Colekan. There can be little doubt that the geologist would find an ample field for study and observation in these unexplored regions. Passing through the country rapidly as I did, at a time when it was unsafe to wander to any distance from camp, all I could do was, to collect specimens of the different rocks composing some of the hilly chains and beds of nullahs, most of which, I regret to say, were lost on the road to Dorinda.